DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 301 339 PS 017 667

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TITLE The Effects of Infant Day Care: How Mothers Feel about Separation from Their Young Infants.
PUB DATE Aug 88
NOTE 15p.; Filmed from best available copy. Paper presented at the Australian Developmental Conference (Sydney, Australia, August 26-28, 1988).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Day Care; Early Childhood Education; *Emotional Experience; Employed Women; Foreign Countries; *Infants; *Mothers; *Parent Attitudes; Parent School Relationship; Personality; Separation Anxiety
IDENTIFIERS Australia; *Guilt; *Infant Care; Sadness

ABSTRACT

A study was made of how Australian mothers feel about having their children in day care, with particular emphasis on mothers' feelings about separation from their children. A total of 10 mothers and 1 father participated in the pilot study. All but 1 parent had a child in day care at least 3 days per week. The children, who were between 4 and 22 months of age, began attending day care prior to their eighth month. Data were gathered using a structured interview consisting of 23 questions and 2 questionnaires: the Maternal Separation Anxiety Scale and the Revised Infant Temperament Questionnaire. Interviews were conducted in the family home by an interviewer who was unnaware of the expected outcomes of the study. Pilot results suggest that Australian women experience day care for their infants as a loss, and hence show a grief reaction which needs to be expressed so that it can move toward resolution. The conflict about infant day care may be most acute for Australian mothers who do not have a financial motivation to return to work, or at least do not perceive economic factors as primary reasons for their return to work. It is concluded that these findings have policy implications for maternity leave, work-place day care services, and day care practice in general. (RH)

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The effects of infant day care: how mothers feel about separation from their young infants.

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Paper presented at the 5th Australian Developmental Conference, Sydney, August, 1988.

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The effects of infant day care: how mothers feel about separation from their young infants.

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To understand the effects of day care attendance on a child it needs to be acknowledged that developmental outcomes result not only from the child's experiences in day care. A critical concern is also the indirect effects on the child that come from the influence of the day care experience on others with whom the child interacts. The focus of the research to be reported today is the child's mother and how she feels about having a child in day care.

Just as there are many aspects to the day care experience for children, so too for parents in general and mothers in particular: - there is relief from "continuous coverage" demands (La Rossa and La Rossa, 1981); there is experience of regular shared responsibility for childcare and hence perhaps dilution of responsibility; there is opportunity for discussion of the child's development with someone who has observed the child on a regular basis; there are societal value systems to be dealt with; and perhaps most centrally, there are repeated daily and often prolonged separations between mother and child. Our research is directed in the main to the last of these factors - maternal feelings about separation from her child.

Very little research has been directed to this question apart from the pioneering work of Ellen Hock of the

Ohio State University. She has found that women differ in what she terms "Maternal Separation Anxiety". "Separation anxiety" is a term long used by psychologists in relation to children but its use in relation to adults is novel and interesting. Hock (1984) defined maternal separation anxiety as an apprehension or concern that is uniquely associated with mother-child separation. She found that a child's adjustment to day care is influenced by the mothers anxiety response.

On the basis of this research on American women, it was decided to initiate a research project exploring how Australian mothers respond to day-care related separation, how they feel about various aspects of the day care experience and what factors appear to promote positive feelings in this context. A pilot study of eleven families has recently been completed and in this paper I will be presenting some preliminary results from this work.

Method

Subjects

Ten mothers and one father participated in our pilot study. Originally we intended only to talk to mothers but when one father indicated his enthusiasm to participate we included him in the sample.

All subjects (excluding one) had a child in day care for at least three days per week as we wanted at this stage to restrict our study to full or near full-time day care. All children had begun attending day care prior to 18 months of age, and three babies had commenced prior to three months of

age. We decided to talk to mothers of infants rather than older children because we felt it is a time when parents' awareness of continuous coverage demands are likely to be most acute, when shared responsibility outside day care minimal, and when separation from the day care child would be most intensely experienced. It is also the age at which increasing numbers of children are entering day care yet about which we know appallingly little.

The sample was recruited from local suburban day care centres which took babies from six weeks of age. Eight day care centres, within an outer-eastern municipality of suburban Melbourne were contacted by letter explaining the project briefly and seeking their co-operation in obtaining subjects. Follow up telephone calls located three centres willing and able to co-operate in the study. Two were newly constructed council run centres and the third was an older privately owned centre.

The age of the infants at time of interview varied (from four to twenty-two months) as did their length of time in day care (two weeks to twenty months). The mean age of the pilot study mothers was 29.7 years (range 24 - 3?), all but two of the families were only-child families; the relationships in the main were long term and all but one mother was currently living with the child's father. The average income level was $21,000 - $40,000, the educational levels varied from some high school to tertiary degree and diploma and the subjects in the main were Anglo-Australians.

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Materials

Data was gathered using a structured interview technique and the questions asked were added to and modified slightly during the pilot study interviews. The final version of the interview included twenty-three questions which among other things explored maternal intentions to return to work pre and post pregnancy, reasons for returning to work, feelings about working and separation from her child both before and after the child entered day care and other issues such as the support of partner and friends and satisfaction with the day care staff.

In addition parents completed two questionnaires - the Maternal Separation Anxiety Scale developed by Hock, Gnezda and McBride (1983) and the RITQ (revised Infant Temperament Questionnaire) or the TTS (Toddler Temperament Scale) revised and normalized for Australian infants and toddlers by Sanson et al (1985) and Prior et al (1987). The RITQ/TTS was given to mothers to determine if maternal separation anxiety was related to maternal perception of infant temperament.

Procedure

Interviews were conducted in the family home and the same female interviewer (the second author) conducted all interviews. She is trained in psychology but was naive as to the literature in the area and hence to any expected outcomes. She was instructed to remain non-evaluative throughout the interview.

Results

Interviews were conducted during June and July of this year and hence we have only begun to collate and analyse the data. I can report however that there was variability within our sample in total scores on the MSAS and on the subscales within this questionaire which have to do with maternal guilt, sadness, beliefs about children's ability to profit from non maternal care and role related conflicts.

We hope to be able to use these data in conjunction with the interview records to help us identify key variables to be investigated in the next stage of our research project. A useful outcome of this pilot work was that mothers were able to complete the questionaire without difficulty hence reassuring us of its applicability in an Australian context.

Transcripts of interviews are currently being typed up but to communicate some feeling for the sort of information being gererated I would like to present a brief summary of aspects of a small selection of records. Those to be discussed are resporses of four mothers selected to give some indication of the range of feelings experienced.

O/H 1 Table 1. Subject details.

PC1 and RC1 were the two mothers whose babies had most recently commenced day care (two weeks). Feelings of grief were being experienced by both these mothers. This was so even though the infants were both attending high quality centres and despite the fact that the motivation for the mothers to return to work differed markedly. PC1 returned to

Table 1. PILOT STUDY - SUBJECT DETAILS (* denotes responses discussed herein)

Subject Code	BC3(F)	PC1*	BC1	RC2*	RC1	PC4	RC3*	PC2	BC4	PC3	BC2*
Childs - sex	M	M	M	F	F	F	F	F	M	M	F
age of entry	2mths	2½mths	2½mths	5mths	6mths	10mths	10mths	12mths	13mths	15mths	17mths
pd. in d.c.	20mths	2wks	2½mths	5mths	4½mths	2½mths	2wks	2½mths	3mths	3mths	3mths
age at interview	22mths	3mths	5mths	10mths	10½mths	12½mths	10½mths	14½mths	16mths	18mths	20mths
Mothers age	31	31	26	28	31	33	24	31	25	34	33
Fathers age	51	33	20	28	34	33	26	36	26	36	30
Siblings	M-23 M-21 (step)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	F-4½yrs	-	M-4½yrs
Years in relationshp	3	12	3	8	9	7	8	8	8	12	6
Income level	2	3	2	3	3	2	2	2	2	1	2
Mothers educ. level	1	4	3	2	4	1	3	2	1	3	4
Fathers educ. level	3	4	1	2	3	3	2	1	1	5	3
Nationality	Dutch (F) Philip. (M)	Austn.	Eng. (F) Austn. (M)	Austn.	Eng.	Austn. (F) Irish (M)	Austn.	Eng.	Austn.	Eng. (F) Austn. (M)	Sth. African

KEYS:

EDUCATION LEVEL:

1. High School
2. HSC
3. TAFE Qualification
4. Tertiary Diploma or Degree
5. Post Graduate Qualification

GROSS COMBINED INCOME:

1. $20,000 or below
2. $21,000 to $40,000
3. $41,000 and above

work because, in her words, it was "financially unviable" for her not to do so. Although her current standard of living was high she reported needing two wages to continue to improve the family's economic position without which she considered the family would "stagnate" financially. She reported that when she came home from hospial she "cried alot"; "I didn't want to go back to work". She said " I can't remember when I last cried (i.e. before this situation) but I cried alot - in the department store, in the street.....in the most ridiculous places but I'd just burst into tears when I'd think about it." Although she reported "being over that now" she nonetheless expressed being upset at the prospect of still being working when the child started school - concerns related to after-school care etc. She seemed to be holding on to a dream of not working sometime in the future. "I've adapted to the fact that if I work hard over the next ten years I'll be here for his adolescence. That might be more necessary than now." She said "I'd far sooner be home - if we could afford it I'd be home full time - I'm not happy about it but we don't have a choice .... you just have to console yourself."

RC3, on the other hand was under no financial pressure to work but after nine months of full time mothering had become unhappy and bored. She said "I just didn't find it very fulfilling being home so I decided to go back to work". Nonetheless reaching the decision to return to work, albeit for only two days a week was very difficult. She said she had not talked her feelings over with anyone (other than her husband) because of her mixed emotions. She said "I felt so stupid because all I could do was cry but I wanted to go back to work"; "I didn't feel I could talk to any of my friends and say 'I don't want to go back to work; I don't want to leave

her' because they would have said 'Well, don't'. I just felt I was being really stupid (like I should tell myself "Make up your mind".)

For RC3 the quality of care her child was receiving was central, and continuing working seemed to hinge on continued satisfaction with day care. "Because I didn't have to go back to work, it was my own choice, I felt so guilty, I felt I had to have really good care for her". She later said "I'm really happy with the care, otherwise I wouldn't have stuck it out this long".

Both women experienced guilt but this appeared to be based in different aspects of the experience for them. Whereas for RC1 the guilt seemed to stem mainly from her need to be free from concerns about her baby during the working day - she said "As heartless as it seems, to succeed I have to not worry about him all day" (at work), for RC3 the guilt stemmed from her choice not to be a full time mother. Although she reported that her friends were supportive and encouraging of her decision to return to work, she felt some people would think she was selfish or that she didn't love her child anymore "now that the novelty had worn off."

The pattern of experience described by RC2 was somewhat different from the two women discussed so far and as her child had been in day care for five months at the interview she highlighted some changes which occurred after the initial "settling in" period. She reported some difficulty in remembering how she had felt at the time her baby entered day care but in her own words "wasn't dreadfully upset." Rather she focussed on the difficulty she experienced

at that time in starting a new job and how well her baby had settled. She even commented that "I would have liked Becky to be a bit upset, but she wasn't." Although she reported basically wishing she wasn't going back to work, in other parts of the interview she focussed on the positive aspects of working. She reported that given total freedom of choice she wouldn't have changed much at all in the past five months except perhaps to work part time not full time, but not at the expense of a fulfilling stimulating job". She enjoyed work and reported that "Becky is happier, I'm happier - the time we're together is better." However, quality of care was very important. She stated "If the centre was not available I'd still be home and struggling - there'd be a lot more arguments - and I wouldn't be at all happy .... Everything's falling into place."

Another interesting point to emerge from this interview was that although sadness was not overwhelming in the early weeks, she reported that after five months "It gets a bit worse now because she's doing more and I'm always afraid I'm going to miss something. There are times (now) when I wish I could be with her all the time because she's getting more interesting....Its a little bit harder now than it was in the beginning.....you get a bit sick of work too at times.....you think it would be nice to be at home but if I was at home I'd rather be at work."

For the mums interviewed, forming a satisfactory working relationship with the day care staff was very important. Mums with children in the high quality centres sought and received reassurance from staff which made their situation much easier to cope with. The sensitivity and

caring of the staff was commented on by many. For mothers with children in low quality care, however, the type of care being received by their child in the centre is itself an added weight on their mind. BC2, for example, was very concerned about the physical care being received by her child. She reported that she chose the day care centre when pressed for time, and had been upset by a number of things that had happened in the centre, but since she was working for financial reasons considered it, as other mothers had mentioned as "something I had to do". Although she said that "When I got to work there were so many things happening that I quickly forgot about it", the whole experience was worrying for her.

This mother had two pre-school children, and had not wanted to return to work. She said it was her husband's decision that she return to work, that she "was forced to do it". She said that once she started working - "it was frustrating - it was a lot of work - I was frustrated and miserable most of the time - I felt I neglected my family". Although she reported saying to her husband "You want me to work so the housework has to be 50/50" it had in her words, "..not worked out that way". For this mother, the combination of the extra workload, lack of support and concerns about care made the whole experience very "trying emotionally." This contrasts with the experience, particularly of RC3 and RC2 whose children were in high quality care and who were very satisfied with the emotional and physical support of their partners. Clearly the scenario for all these women would have been different if their particular experiences in these areas had been more or less positive.

Discussion

Although we still have much to do by way of data analyses I believe this area of research will help us to understand the effects of day care more fully. We intend to use the pilot study data to identify a small number of variables (e.g., age of entry, quality of care etc.,) which will be investigated systematically in a follow up study. What our results to date suggest is that women experience day care for their infants as a loss, and hence show a grief reaction which needs to be expressed so that it can move towards resolution. Women experiance conflict about infant day care and possibly this is most acute for those mothers who do not have a financial motivation to return to work, or who do not at least perceive economic factors as primary in their return to paid employment. These and other results have policy implications to do with maternity leave and work-place day care among other things and also have implications for day care practice. Clearly there is a need for professionals to acknowledge and be informed about maternal separation anxiety and the grief reaction and hence help to provide a setting in which a mother can express and hopefully resolve her grief. This should contribute to positive day care effects for both mother and child. Finally, it is crucial for mothers to become better informed about the likely effects of day care on their children. When women fear, and others erroneously confirm that day care in general and daycare related separation from mother in particular is necessarily bad for their child's development, the possibility arises of a self-fulfilling prophesy which could have been avoided.

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